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AUTHOR Martyn, Elaine; Voller, Peter
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ABSTRACT

This paper details the results of two surveys of teacher attitudes to self-access that took place at the English Centre at the University of Hong Kong during the 1992-93 year, and relate these back to an earlier survey of teacher attitudes from the previous year. The Survey of Teacher Attitudes to Self-Access Learning is appended. (JL)

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Teachers' Attitudes to Self-Access Learning

Elaine Martyn & Peter Voller
The University of Hong Kong

Though no research has proven that teachers-their attitudes, values, expectations, relationship with students, and confidence in self-access learning-make a difference to the success of this type of learning, these factors are often raised as significant (Littlejohn, 1985; Tompkins & McGraw, 1988; Ellis & Sinclair, 1989; O'Dell, 1992; Nakhoul, 1993). For example, based on an experiment with 150 Bachelor of Education students, Littlejohn (1985) found two factors that appeared to influence students' success in self-access learning most: the maturity and previous experience of learners, and the attitude of the teacher. O'Dell (1992) placed a similar focus on the teacher in the process of self-access language learning. She summarised her view as follows:

> Our experience ...has shown very clearly that most of the students who make full use of the learning centre's resources are in classes where the teacher is confident and well-informed as far as learning centre use is concerned. ...Thus, the teacher has a key role to play in the exploitation of the study centre (p. 153).

In this paper we will detail the results of two surveys of teacher attitudes to self-access which took place at the English Centre at the University of Hong Kong during the 1992-93 academic year and relate these back to an earlier survey of teacher attitudes conducted in the previous year.

The original survey conducted by members of the Self-Access Action Research (SAAR) group was intended to identify teachers' views of self-access in the context of its introduction into two major first year English courses in the academic year 1991-2, particularly since one-third (20 hours) of these courses had been allocated to self-access study. As noted in the original report on the project (Martyn and Chan, 1992):

> We believed that the success of self-access hinged as much on learner training as on materials, so were convinced that to make the whole SA [self-access] concept work, we would need to work on human resources and implementation strategies (p.59).

The survey confirmed that although most teachers had a fairly positive view of self-access learning, they were concerned about its implementation and effectiveness as a required course component. The results also pointed to the need to develop more effective teaching/learning strategies to maximize the potential benefits of self-access. Thus the members tested various approaches to self-access during the second semester focusing on learner training and motivation. At the end of the school year, the group made several recommendations to the English Centre. Most influential were those dealing with orientation to self-access.

As a result orientation materials and activities for both students and staff were developed. These consisted of: a video that introduced self-access learning and the Practice Lab facilities; a Practice Lab orientation map; a crossword puzzle that required students to use Practice Lab resources and facilities in order to complete it; an orientation game in which students had to try out self-access materials to answer questions on cards; a Practice Lab tour in which a teacher or consultant would briefly introduce self-access materials and facilities; a unit introducing self-access learning in the course materials; a self-access log book that both helped students to plan their self-access learning and provided a record of their self-access work over the year; and tutorials in which teachers and students could discuss their progress in self-access study.

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There was also a half-day workshop for teachers which included brief statements by a number of staff members on the new cataloguing system, new materials, and the role of self-access in various courses. After this teachers went to the Practice Lab for an experience of students' orientation to self-access. Some were given cards containing the kind of advice that had often been given to students in the past, for example, "You say you want to improve your pronunciation. Try using *Ship or Sheep*." Other teachers tried out some of the new activities listed above. During this period in the Lab, three staff members who had been assigned as consultants (ie., self-access facilitators or helpers) for students also acted in this role for teachers. The workshop ended with small group discussions of how teachers felt when they tried to follow the advice or do the activities they were assigned.

Self-Access/Practice Lab Orientation Questionnaire

Towards the end of the first semester, teachers were asked to complete a questionnaire on self-access/Practice Lab orientation for themselves and their students. They identified the activities they had used, rated their effectiveness, and gave comments in support of their ratings.

Teachers identified the activities they had selected for self-orientation; in rank order they were: the *Workshop for Teachers*, the *Self-Access Video* and *Lab Tour*, and *Orientation Game Cards*. The *Workshop* was rated very highly with 'excellent' and 'useful' as common descriptors. One extended comment offers a good summary: 'Excellent overview and update for both new and old staff. Good range of presenters and variety of activities'. One respondent focused on the *hands-on* approach of the second part of the workshop: 'This was a good way to get direct experience plus feedback/teacher opinion.' Only one negative comment was offered: 'not particularly productive'.

1/2	Video/Game Cards
3	Lab Tour
4	Crossword Puzzle
5	Map
6	Tutorials
7/8	SA Unit/Log

FIGURE 1: TEACHER RANKING OF
THE EFFECTIVENESS OF ORIENTATION ACTIVITIES

The most illuminating result was the teachers' ratings of the effectiveness of orientation activities for students which showed that the orientation to facilities was effective (the top five out of eight items), while initiatives aimed at self-access learning were clearly less so (the lowest three items). *Figure 1* presents the ratings in rank order. The *Introduction to Self-Access* video was available late, yet received the highest rating. It was used to consolidate the experience of other activities by some teachers; one teacher wrote 'Very effective, concise and to-the-point. I used it a few weeks after the lab tour, as a reminder, to revive any flagging spirits there might be'. In terms of her own preparation, another wrote, 'OK, I think it helped orientate *me* better for the Lab tour. Another identified the need to use it in conjunction with more *hands-on* activities: 'effective in giving an overview, but so fast that it needs immediate follow-up in the Practice Lab'. Equally highly ranked were the *Orientation Game Cards*: 'useful, interesting, and effective', though concerns were voiced in terms of time and the lack of a 'defined outcome' which, however, the *Crossword Puzzle* offered. The class feedback stage was for some useful, but for others difficult or simply not done. The *Lab Tour*, which has been commonly used in the past, was seen as quick and effective particularly for classes without assigned self-access hours. The *Crossword Puzzle* was time-consuming but also challenging. One teacher commented, 'The idea is excellent and was very motivating for students. I used it to develop group cohesion (through a sense of competition, ie., which group could finish first).' The *Practice Lab Map* activity was found to be quick and enjoyable, but a few teachers would have preferred to simply distribute a correct one.

Only two teachers raised real issue with these activities. One was concerned with the *seriousness* of the tasks which took a gaming approach: '[The game cards, puzzle and map] all seemed a bit trivializing to me and I was reluctant to use them.' Time, a notable cause for concern among several teachers was elaborated in this way: 'Whatever approach we took to orientation proved very time consuming. Could this be done by consultants maybe? Or would that exclude class teachers from the SA process?'

The three items which were rated lowest by teachers, *Tutorials, Self-Access Unit*, and *Log* were different from the above in two respects. Firstly they were more directly aimed at promoting self-access learning, which required a significant change in teachers' and learners' roles and relationships. Secondly, they had both introductory and on-going functions, as they were used throughout the school year. Thus in their ratings it is likely, and in their comments, it is clear that many teachers did not distinguish between these two aspects, perhaps realistically. For example, one teacher wrote, "The first tutorial was really a discussion of goals ...It does not seem to have been very helpful, because most students do not want to do more than they have to!" Another commented that *tutorials* were the "key to success of self-access work - evidence of teachers' interest and [of the] follow-through necessary for effective self-access".

Concerns regarding *tutorials* focused on time, the teacher's role, and students' roles. One teacher complained, "Much more time is needed to do it properly (ie., one at a time in the Practice Lab)". Another was concerned with how to judge students' self-access work: "It is a bit difficult to give comments on their self-access work especially on quality. It is very easy to measure their quantity of work but not quality." A third commented, "inadequate in terms of student contribution". Thus it appears teachers were uncertain as to how to use tutorials effectively in support of self-access.

Though the *log* appears at the bottom of the ratings list, it received positive as well as negative comments. Positive comments included, "a lot of built-in guidance" and "Useful ...it focuses students on tasks and provides opportunities for practical feedback". Several of the negative comments focused on wording and level of detail in specific sections; broadly summarised these concerns were: "Too long, too unclear, repetitive". One teacher's lack of awareness of the difficulties faced by students was highlighted: "Surprisingly many students didn't seem to understand how they were supposed to use [the log]." This shows the same naivety as that of the designers who failed to clarify usage; yet is it really so surprising that many teachers and learners were ill-equipped to deal with the rather drastic change in roles and relationships which the *log* required? Next an unexpected comment: "I didn't use this as I'm not too keen on this type of approach. I find the layout of the log rather prescriptive (why can't students keep a record in their own way?)" Yet the designers had realized that the approach would clearly not be the most acceptable or effective for all teachers or learners, and thus had intended to convey that use of the *log* was a choice for teachers and perhaps learners--depending on the teacher's view. The most valuable summary statement, which will be taken into consideration in materials revision, was: "Needs simplification/clarification for teachers and students".

Difficulties with the *self-access unit* materials related to their length, function and overlap with the *log*. Student materials were considered to be too long ("wordy"and "detailed"), and their value vis-a-vis the *log* or alternative modes of conveying basic information to students was questioned. In fact, the designers intended the unit to be more general than the log to allow the teacher maximum flexibility in selection of materials and processes.

Two problems (and potential solutions) are evident in relation to the last two items, the *log* and the *unit* . First, the intentions of designers needed to be effectively transmitted to teachers, so (1) teachers would have felt freer to make their choices--which had been recognised as significant in the materials planning stage and (2) teachers should have been made aware that these items were to be seen as secondary, though guiding, tools for negotiations and relations between the teacher and learners. A preliminary analysis of 140 *self-access logs* and the Survey of Teacher Attitudes (presented in the next

section) point to a great variation in teachers' awareness of self-directed learning and the theories and practices which accompany it. Clearly, teachers need not only information and materials to make an effective shift in teacher/learner roles and relationships. They need to understand the ideas behind any innovation such as this, which they can then measure or consider vis-a-vis their own educational beliefs and values. And if they choose to implement this new approach they may need to be inducted into the process of negotiating with students.

Overall the questionnaire results indicate a successful orientation to facilities and initial presentation of self-access in courses, but suggest that teachers still feel uncertain about how to effectively maintain momentum and student motivation throughout the year.

Survey of teacher attitudes to self-access

In order to investigate this finding further, and also to determine whether teacher attitudes to self-access had changed significantly since the SAAR survey, a second survey of teacher attitudes to self-access learning was carried out in March 1993. (See Appendix for questions and results.) Some questions and many of the descriptors in this follow-up questionnaire were based on items and responses made in the SAAR survey. The following discussion will focus on some key issues raised by analysis of the data.

The first point of interest was that teacher attitudes to self-access had polarised somewhat compared to the previous year (see figure 2). A comparison of each teacher's answers to questions three and five of the survey showed that individuals who had had a negative or non-committal attitude to self-access in September 1992 had not changed their opinions, or had even become more negative by March 1993, whereas very few who had started with a positive attitude in September had become less so, and some even became more positive. This is the opposite tendency to that evidenced in the previous year's SAAR survey where all those teachers who had started the year with positive attitudes became less happy with self-access as the year progressed. These results suggest that teachers in 1991 may have had unrealistically high expectations of self-access learning, but that they started 1992 in a more realistic frame of mind, perhaps due to the orientation activities and the previous year's experience. This would also explain a significant difference evidenced by question six about the allocation of class hours to self-access: fewer teachers now see this allocation as a waste of time, down from 40% in the SAAR survey to 9% this year.

1993 Survey:	less positive	no change	more positive
4 teachers initially negative	2	2	
6 teachers initially neutral	3	2	1
17 teachers initially positive	2	11	4
SAAR (1992) Survey:			
2 teachers initially negative			2
2 teachers initially neutral		2	2
17 teachers initially positive	10	7	

FIGURE 2: TEACHERS' CHANGING ATTITUDES TO SELF-ACCESS OVER THE COURSE OF THE ACADEMIC YEARS 1991-2 & 1992-3

The attitude change indicated by responses to questions 5 and 6, and the generally positive feelings towards self-access recorded in question 3 (63% positive and only 15% negative) have to be set against the results for question 4, where only 15% of respondents felt that self-access had been effective at Hong Kong University, and a large minority (41%) felt it had been ineffective. The rest (44%) adopted a non-committal position. This perceived lack of effectiveness seems to confirm the results of the orientation questionnaire, that teachers are unhappy about how to sustain momentum for self-access learning through the year. What factors, then, do teachers see as inhibiting the effectiveness of self-access?

This is a question that cannot be fully answered from the survey, though a number of conjectures can be made. The first relates to teachers' understanding of the term 'self-access', the second, teachers' perception of student attitudes to self-access and the third, the nature of facilities and materials available for self-access learning.

As regards the first point, a number of respondents had difficulty in answering question 1, about years of experience with self-access, precisely because of the ambiguity of the term[1]. Replies to question 6 were likewise restricted where, although 45% of respondents considered self-access a good way to lead students to independent learning, some qualified their answer with comments like 'in theory' or 'only for *some* students'. 27% said it was a good way to individualise student instruction. The spread of responses, the number of alternatives, and the fact that four respondents ticked more than one category indicate that teachers still hold a wide variety of views of what self-access is. The issue is also complicated by the fact that self-access is a course component, and there may therefore be some conflict between an individual's idea of what self-access learning *should* be and what it is *required* to be by the course designers.

Question 8 dealt directly with the second issue: teachers' perceptions of students' attitudes to self-access. Respondents rated almost 25% of students as unwilling to do any self-access learning, and only 16% as enthusiastic. Teachers felt that a majority (60%) of students were appreciative but lacked the time or skills for self-access learning. There were, however, a number of objections to the descriptors, for instance that it was not lack of time but lack of motivation and study habits, or that students did not do self-access because stimulating materials were lacking. Nevertheless, the generally negative perception evidenced by this question may partly explain the perceived lack of effectiveness of self-access: teachers do not expect much of students, so students do not do much. This again suggests that teachers need greater preparation for the shift in teacher/learner roles and relationships that effective self-access learning entails. However, the large minority (41%) who felt that students have no time for self-access study is perhaps responding to another issue, that of the *status* of self-access within the course workload. If course requirements mean that students already have a lot of set work to do outside class, and if it is clear that self-access study will not be rigorously assessed either by the teacher or in end-of-course tests, then it would be no surprise to find it given low priority in student work schedules. Further investigation, of student attitudes to self-access study in courses, is required.

The third issue, the nature of materials and facilities available for self-access learning, was not directly addressed by the survey. However, two questions, 7 and 9, do attempt to find out how widely used and helpful certain instruments were in supporting self-access learning. The lack of appeal of the *Self-Access Log* noted in the orientation questionnaire above is also found in this survey. Although 85% of respondents distributed logs, and 58% checked their students' progress in them, 32% of those who used them did not find them useful in promoting self-access learning and 27% were non-committal. Of greater perceived use were the Practice Lab consultants, with a 67% approval rating, followed by tutorials and individual consultations, with 52% and 53% respectively. Tutorials seem to have been the preferred forum for providing feedback on self-access, with 62% of teachers listening to quick progress reports in them. However, it should also be noted that nearly as many teachers reported providing individualised feedback to students, either written or spoken. Overall, these results show that teachers are providing a significant amount of feedback to students, yet still perceive self-access as largely ineffective, suggesting

again the need for further investigation of *student* attitudes to self-access course work, and of how to effectively implement changes in teacher/learner roles.

The final question of the survey, question 10, asked for suggestions for training teachers in self-access in the next academic year, and provides some indications of how the effectiveness of self-access could be improved. There was a lot of support for another workshop, both for orientation/familiarisation and to discuss ways of setting goals and helping students to achieve them. A number of teachers mentioned the need for *pathways* both through materials for the students and to demonstrate to teachers how to move from self-access towards independent learning. There was also a fair amount of interest in promoting periodic exchanges of ideas, with regular information sessions and seminars or workshops on specific areas, for example on how individual teachers follow through self-access, throughout the year. There were also some reservations, namely that training teachers will only work if they are positive about self-access, or that self-access needs to be made much more structured, with much clearer demarcation of the work that students are supposed to do so that teachers can monitor their work more effectively. A few respondents also commented on resources, suggesting that students needed more course-related material, while others commented that project work was self-access learning too. Again, lack of consensus over what constitutes self-access learning, especially when it is part of a course, and suitable materials for such learning is evident.

Broadly speaking, the survey results suggest that teachers do see self-access as a useful way to individualise learning and lead into independent learning, but are uncertain how to make self-access effective. The survey could not provide definite reasons for this perceived lack of effectiveness, beyond a general concern about student attitudes. What is really needed, therefore, at this stage is to find out how *students* view the self-access component of their courses. The results of the 1993 EAS course evaluation showed that 63% of students did not feel that self-access had benefitted their academic work, but a much more detailed investigation needs to be done if we are to pinpoint the reasons for the perceived lack of effectiveness of self-access. In the shorter term, it would be useful to clarify what we mean by self-access when it is part of a course, and to define more clearly how self-access learning can best be implemented to the satisfaction of both students and teachers.

Notes

1. The questionnaire designers were aware that the term 'self-access' would be interpreted differently by different people. One purpose of the survey was to highlight these differences so as to inform future discussion among English Centre teachers.

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APPENDIX:
SURVEY OF TEACHER ATTITUDES TO SELF-ACCESS LEARNING

The total number of respondents was 28.

1. How many years of experience do you have with self-access? *ave.* **4.3** years

2. Have you been involved with any of the following? *Please tick:*
   [**9**] SAAR [**11**] SA Committee [**13**] AV Committee
   [**5**] SA Consultation

3. How do you feel about self-access? *Circle a number:*

	very positive				very negative
	5	4	3	2	1
n=28, mean=3.89, blank=1		**11**	**6**	**6**	**4**	**0**
		{ 63% }	**22%**	**15%**		

4. How effective do you feel self-access has been at HKU? *Circle a number:*

	very effective				not effective at all
	5	4	3	2	1
n=28, mean=2.70, blank=1		**0**	**4**	**12**	**10**	**1**
		15%	**44%**	**{ 41% }**		

5. How would you compare your attitude to self-access now with your attitude early in the first semester? *Circle a number:*

	more positive				less positive
	5	4	3	2	1
n=28, mean=2.75		**1**	**3**	**15**	**6**	**3**

6. How do you feel about the allocation of one-third of course hours to self-access in the EAS and ACSS courses? *Tick one of the following:*
   9% [**2 (+2)**] an unnecessary reduction of class time
   27% [**6 (+3)**] a useful way to individualise student instruction
   45% [**10 (+3)**] a good way to lead students into independent learning *(in theory=2)*
   18% [**4**] other

7. What strategies/feedback did you use to support student self-access learning? *Tick the ones you used:*
   85% [**22**] distributed self-access logs
   58% [**15**] followed students' progress by checking SA logs
   35% [**9**] provided detailed written feedback in their SA logs
   62% [**16**] listened to quick progress reports in tutorials
   23% [**6**] held individual consultations
   [**0**] did nothing
   35% [**9**] other

8. What are your perceptions of students' attitudes to self-access learning? *Estimate the percentage who would fit each of the following categories:*
   [**24.35 %**] unwilling to do any SA study
   [**41.61 %**] can appreciate the idea, but have no time to study
   [**18.52 %**] like the idea, but do not really know how to proceed
   [**15.78 %**] enthusiastic about and regularly doing SA
   [100%]

9. How useful have the following been in promoting self-access learning? *Circle a number for each item you have used:*

	very useful				useless	
the self-access log book	5	4	3	2	1	
n=24, blank=2	**3**	**6**	**6**	**9**	**0**	
mean=3.13		**{ 38% }**	**25%**	**32%**		
tutorials with your students		5	4	3	2	1
n=25, blank=3	**7**	**5**	**7**	**4**	**0**	
mean=3.48		**{ 52% }**	**30%**	**{ 17% }**		
the Practice Lab consultants		5	4	3	2	1
n=21, blank=5	**8**	**6**	**3**	**2**	**2**	
mean=3.76		**{ 67% }**	**14%**	**{ 19% }**		
individual consultations with students	5	4	3	2	1	
n=15, blank=11		**1**	**7**	**3**	**2**	**2**
mean=3.2		**{ 53% }**	**20%**	**{ 27% }**		